DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 378 536 CS 011 955

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TITLE	Underlining (or Highlighting): Cuing the Computer Brain. AVKO "Great Idea" Reprint Series No. 628.
INSTITUTION	AVKO Educational Research Foundation, Clio, MI.
PUB DATE	82
NOTE	11p.; For other documents in this series, see CS 011 943-960.
AVAILABLE FROM	AVKO Educational Research Foundation, 3084 W. Willard Rd., Clio, MI 48420-7801 ($1; quantity discounts available).
PUB TYPE	Guides - Classroom Use - Teaching Guides (For Teacher) (052)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Elementary Education; Readability; Reading Material Selection; *Reading Strategies; *Study Skills; Vocabulary Development; Word Recognition
IDENTIFIERS	*Highlighting (Text); *Underlining

ABSTRACT

Letting students as they read underline or highlight words they do not know allows teachers to find out the words their students do not know. This procedure also leaves a record of all the once unknown words for students to re-read later. It is an added advantage for teachers that it allows them to see how far into a book students have read, and whether the book is either too easy or too hard. The real reason for having students underline or highlight words is to help them discover that they can learn words by themselves if they alert their "computer" brains that there is something that needs to be learned. Underlining or highlighting cues the computer brain that the word is a problem for the brain to solve. Underlining or highlighting is an active process that can help make reading an active rather than a passive process. (RS)

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Underlining

(or Highlighting):

Cuing the Computer Brain

by
Don McCabe

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AVKO "Great Idea"
Reprint Series #628

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UNDERLINING (OR HIGHLIGHTING):

CUING THE COMPUTER BRAIN

By

Don McCabe

The AVKO "Great Idea" Reprint Series

#628

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What is AVKO?

AVKO is a non-profit tax-exempt membership organization founded in 1974 that is:

- subsidized by donations and grants.
- open to membership to anyone interested in helping others learn to read and write.
- run by members from as far away as Hawaii and Quebec and whose daily operations are handled by volunteers.
- planning to build and operate a model reading research center in a YEAR-AROUND **camp** setting that would economically and efficiently service the needs of dyslexics of all ages.
- trying to spread the concept that parent and spouse tutoring in spelling/reading skills can be successfully taught in adult community education classes and that members of a problem reader's support group can greatly assist the efforts of any volunteer tutor working in the literacy movement.
- providing newsletters and economical opportunities to pursue individual research projects and to take part in large scale cooperative research projects that have immediate practical applications.
- attempting to accomplish these goals primarily through the profits generated by the inservices, workshops and the sale of materials developed for the special needs of students, parents, and adults – but AVKO still needs donations to survive.

UNDERLINING (OR HIGHLIGHTING): CUING THE COMPUTER BRAIN

There are many good reasons to get your students in the habit of Underlining (or highlighting) words which they don't know while they are reading. The most obvious is that it allows you, the teacher (or parent, as the case may be) to find out which words they don't know.

It also leaves a record which can be rewarding to both you and your students when you later on have them re-read from a book with loads of underlined (or highlighted) words which they -- by then -- can read.

As a teacher, I learned to prefer having my students mark up their books with pencil marks than to copy something and call it a book report. By giving students the choice of a 500 word report or Underlining (or highlighting) words they don't know, I usually was able to get students to do it "my" way.

And "my" way did have its built-in teacher advantages. I could easily tell:

1. How far into a book they were. If words are only underlined (or highlighted) in the first 25 pages, that's as far as they are.

2. Whether or not the book is too easy or too difficult.

   A. More than five underlined (or highlighted) words per page, may indicate it's too difficult. Certainly, three underlined (or highlighted) words per line

(as has happened) indicates the book might as well be written in Sanskrit.

B. No underlined (or highlighted) words or only one every five or six pages usually indicates the book is too easy. In fact, no underlined (or highlighted) words usually meant that the student hadn't read the book. Of course, there will always be those who think they are smarter than the teacher who will swear up and down that they read all 1200 pages of Tolstoi's *War and Peace*, but they didn't underline or highlight any words because they knew all of them. A quick check of:

1. What's this word?
2. What's this word?
3. What does this word mean?

generally reveals the story. They were bluffing.

I tell my students that they must remember the agreement. They are to read the book and underline in pencil (or highlight) all the words they can't pronounce AND all words whose meaning they are not sure of even though they may be able to pronounce them. If they are not willing to do the Underlining (or highlighting) then they must do the writing of the 500 word book report.

But the real reason for having my students underline or highlight words is to help them discover that they can learn words by themselves--if, they alert their computer brains, that there is something that needs to be learned.

That's where Underlining (or highlighting) comes in. The very act of Underlining (or highlighting) is a cue

a cue

to the computer brain that there is a problem to solve. Without the cuing by Underlining (or highlighting), the pattern of letters skipped over will no more be retained by the computer brain than the *zvcxtwmtqs* of a foreign language or the position of the telephone poles and fire hydrants you pass by every day on the way to work.

When I give my students the instructions about Underlining (or highlighting) (or the "choice" of Underlining (or highlighting) or writing a 500 word report), I also give them the reason. I don't want to leave the impression that I'm asking them to underline or highlight because I have stock in a pencil or a highlighter company.

I tell them that when they are reading they are bound to come across words they can't pronounce or whose meaning is beyond them. They can't just stop reading because the word is *lough*.

They must go on. Unfortunately, the student doesn't just go on, the student SKIPS the word. Skipping is something we do when it isn't important. Skipping words gives the computer brain the incorrect message. But Underlining (or highlighting) doesn't.

Underlining (or highlighting) CUES the computer brain that this is a problem for it to solve.

If a cue is repeated frequently enough, one of two things is liable to happen. The most common is that the computer

brain will solve the problem and all of a sudden you just know what the word is and what the word means. This is how we learned all our basic vocabulary as infants and small children. The computer brain solved problems for us.

The other thing that happens after a specific word is underlined (or highlighted) time after time after time, is that even though the computer hasn't solved the problem it is now triggering you into action to help it learn by making you mad enough to ASK, "Hey Ma, Hey, teacher, Hey anybody, what does *lough* mean? Does it rhyme with tough, bough, dough, or through?"

I know that constant encountering of the same word can be infuriating, because that's what happened to me when I was reading *Trinity* by Leon Uris. After about the seventh time, I encountered that (censored) -ough word that I couldn't pronounce or even puzzle out the meaning from context (there never was any), I was so furious, I actually used the dictionary. Because I was so angry, I learned that *lough* is the Irish spelling of lake and is pronounced the same as in Scotland where they spell it *loch* but say something that sounds to me like "lock."

Good readers, like you and I, mentally underline words which we don't know as we read. And because we read a great deal, our vocabularies are large. What the readers who aren't as good as you and I can do to develop the MINDSET for learning is to get into the habit of using a pencil to underline or highlight words that they don't know.

THERE ARE TWO MAIN REASONS FOR UNDERLINING (OR HIGHLIGHTING):

1. To alert the computer brain that the word is a word that you need to learn.

2. To alert the computer brain that the particular passage is meaningful to you and you want to remember it.

Underlining (or highlighting) is an active process and it helps to make reading an active rather than passive process.

We urge you to adopt this method, and we urge the researchers at the universities to test out this theory that Underlining (or highlighting) can be a cue to the computer brain.

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